

BOOK REVIEWS



The Fabric of Marian Devotion in Isabel de Villena's Vita Christi, by Leslie Twomey. Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2013. Pp. 314. ISBN: 9781855662483.

THE *Vita Christi* by Sor Isabel de Villena (1430–1490) enjoys several distinctions, being one of the earliest books published in Catalan (in 1497) as well as the only considerable work of female authorship written in the area vernacular. Sor Isabel could boast an illustrious, if slightly tarnished background, as the illegitimate daughter of Enrique of Aragon and Castile, the Marques de Villena, and a relative of both the royal families in Castile and Aragon. She spent her childhood at the court in Valencia under the tutelage of Maria of Castile. At the age of fifteen, she entered Santa Trinitat, a newly founded Poor Clare convent under the patronage of Maria. Due to her illegitimacy, she received a papal dispensation to rule as abbess, which she did from the age of thirty-three until her death. It was Sor Isabel's roles as leader, teacher, and mentor to the nuns of Santa Trinitat that Leslee Twomey argues led her to compose the *Vita Christi*. In *The Fabric of Marian Devotion*, Twomey focuses on the gendered aspects of Sor Isabel's opus, particularly her devotion to the immaculate body of the Virgin Mary.

Sor Isabel's work was part of a surge of *vitae Christi* written in Castile, Valencia, and Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century. Given that there was no shortage of devotional works for her nuns, Sor Isabel must have possessed specific reasons for composing her own. Twomey argues that she specifically wanted to provide female role models for her nuns, the Virgin Mary in particular, but also women from the Old Testament and more recent religious women, such as St. Clare. In other words, Isabel wanted a book "written for, about, and by women" (21).

Twomey focuses on the gendered aspects of the *Vita Christi*, especially on how the Virgin Mary models and embodies convent life as the nuns of St. Clare would have recognized it. The Mary of the *Vita Christi* practices asceticism even in infancy. When she entered the temple, she gave away her possessions, changing her dress at the door (all practices common to vestition ceremonies).

While Mary's immaculate nature is unattainable, Twomey argues that Isabel focuses on the aspects of her life that nuns could strive to emulate. Her view of women is consistently positive, and she stresses the female presence in Christ's life. Unlike other female religious writers, she does not employ tropes of subservience, rather presenting herself as a religious authority, a role she also attributes to the Virgin Mary. Twomey points out that Isabel's literacy as well as her fluency with scripture allowed her to create such a work without male censure or interference, contrasting her with women like Elizabeth of Schönau or Angela de Foligno who required the transcription skills of men, opening up questions of editorial interference.

The heart of this book is a series of chapters focusing on material culture. Twomey analyzes the betrothal gifts the Virgin receives as well as the wardrobe that takes her from earth to heaven, including her crimson tunic, her six pairs of high-heeled shoes, her gold-embroidered and enamel-emblazoned gowns, her lavish jewelry, and her twelve-star crown. Twomey begins by taking the objects out of the realm of the spiritual and considering them in the context of the Spanish economy. Using guild records, descriptions of royal weddings, and even dyeing recipes, Twomey demonstrates that Isabel adorned the Virgin in the most luxurious of contemporary fashions. From the materials (light-reflecting damask and silk) to the colors, particularly red, her clothing indicated wealth and status. Kermes, the dried insect that produced crimson, was the most expensive of dyestuffs, used by Maximilian's daughter Margaret for her wedding. So by dressing Mary in crimson, Isabel was literally fitting her out for queenship. Yet, there was "more at stake than an interest in fashion" (131). Every stitch possessed a codified meaning that Twomey indicates would be apparent to Isabel's nuns. The herb and flower embroidery featured lilies, chasteberries, and pearls, all known allusions to virginity. Other items related back to Old Testament imagery as well as convent life. The Virgin's crown, for example, was not only reminiscent of Old Testament queens such as Esther and Bathsheba but also the crowning that was part of each nun's entry into the convent. The high-heeled shoes, or *tapins*, a staple of royal dowries, called to mind the line from the Song of Songs, "How beautiful are your feet in sandals." The crimson of the tunic indicated not only nobility, but her life's blood that nurtured Christ in the womb, the Holy Spirit that overshadowed her, and the Pentecost.

The act of the Virgin's dressing and undressing was significant in itself—symbolizing marriage and the remaking of a bride into her husband's family. It finds parallels in medieval betrothal stories such as *Griselda's*, where the idea of "re-clothing" is central to the marriage, in this case, between God and humanity.

Twomey argues that Isabel's elevation of female characteristics and characters in the *Vita Christi* while avoiding any misogynist tropes distinguishes her work from other Spanish *vitae Christi*. Yet in other ways the *Vita* is fundamentally Franciscan, even its focus on material culture. While Franciscans rejected earthly luxuries, they still acknowledged that pure souls would receive jewels in heaven. Isabel's enthusiastic love of the Eucharist as well as her recounting of the Virgin's emotional responses to it also "reveals how she had absorbed the religious traditions which enfolded her" (232). The uniqueness of Isabel's achievement resides in her ability to utilize spiritual inclinations while "creating a female space" specifically for the edification of nuns (41).

Twomey has certainly created a book about the world of Spanish Franciscan writing and the Valencian market, but she situates it in medieval women's religious writing from around Europe, including the works of Elizabeth of Schönau, Hildegard von Bingen, and others. She is likewise in conversation with writers of female spirituality from Carolyn Walker Bynum to Anneke Mulder-Baaker, with a nod to classic writers like Eileen Power. *The Fabric of Marian Devotion* will thus appeal to all medievalists interested in female religious writing, regardless of their geographic focus.

Sadly, the production of the book itself is lacking. The text has been poorly copyedited, with some glaring mistakes. For a work so focused on rich imagery, it strangely features only black and white pictures, in some cases blurry, in others too dark, and generally of poor quality. A work of such high-level analysis, research, and appeal deserves better.

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